US Army Corps of Engineers
St. Louis District

News Release

Release No. 23-06

Contact: Public Affairs Office
314-331-8068/8002

For Release: IMMEDIATE – November 22, 2006

1222 Spruce Street, St. Louis, Missouri 63103-2833
www.mvs.usace.army.mil

Rock Pinnacles on Middle Mississippi Pose Threat to Navigation

Dangerous, sharp pinnacle rock located in the Middle Mississippi River's navigation channel near Grand Tower and Thebes Gap, south of St. Louis, is emerging as a potential threat to navigation as low water conditions continue to plague the area. The limestone rock will start to interfere with navigation when river stages descend to about -4 feet on the St. Louis gage and 3.8 feet on the Cape Girardeau gage, a distinct possibility this winter due to below normal precipitation, depleted reservoirs and possible winter freezes on the Upper Mississippi River.

The Army Corps of Engineers St. Louis District is taking steps to remove the rock, which is in approximately the same areas as rock removed in the late 1980s. Far less rock will be removed this time though. Then, about 145,000 cubic yards of rock was removed from the river. This time, about 4,700 cubic yards will have to be removed from the navigation channel.

District Commander Col. Lewis F. Setliff III has directed that contracting actions move forward and that priority be placed on completing the necessary environmental preparations. A public notice from the St. Louis District's Regulatory Branch has been issued for the required Section 404 and Section 10 permits, requesting public comment on the plan. Long range weather forecasts and known plans for regulating water supplies from Army Corps of Engineers reservoirs have factored into the decision to plan federal action. "We must take all possible measures to prevent damage and protect against harm," Col. Setliff said.

The Corps will comply with all requirements of both the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act. Two endangered species have been found in this stretch of river: the Least Tern and the Pallid Sturgeon. The Least Tern, a migratory bird, is only in the area in the spring and summer so it will not be impacted by the work. Pallid Sturgeon are mobile and expected to move when work begins. Additionally, this is well outside of the normal spring spawning season, a critical time for this species, so impact is expected to be minimal.

"We are taking all possible precautions to ensure against impacts," said Tom Keevin, fisheries biologist and Pallid Sturgeon expert with the St. Louis District.

Unless this rock is removed, the low water caused by the 7 year drought will cause these rock pinnacles to impinge upon the safe operation of the Mississippi River navigation channel. It has been estimated that shutting down Mississippi River navigation for only a week could cost about $16 million.

The St. Louis District continues to coordinate closely with the navigation industry, the United States Coast Guard, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the Missouri Departments of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Project Manager Leonard Hopkins noted that while a great deal of rock was removed in the 1980s where work is projected now, better survey technology has helped identify the remaining points.

The method for removing the rock will be drilling into the pinnacles, and then detonating explosives in them. The blasted rock will then be lifted from the river bottom. The rock material has been assessed as being too hard to remove with cutter head dredges. Some of the removed rock will be used to create habitat diversity for aquatic species.

-END-